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Review of Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*.

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Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999. 325 pp. ISBN 0822322692.

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Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship* begins with an anecdote about Hong Kong business leaders who, facing the political uncertainty of the city-state's imminent return to the People's Republic of China in 1997, began to accumulate foreign passports not only as a "matter of convenience," but, as one let slip accidentally, "a matter of confidence." Ong's book is about this ambivalence that attends the flows of people and capital across the Pacific, and the cultural meanings that are created in order to make sense of them. For Ong, the Hong Kong business elite adopted a kind of "flexible citizenship" in the wake of Tiananmen Square and with a view to Hong Kong's patriation: "Many Hong Kongers opted to work in China while seeking citizenship elsewhere. Caught between British disciplinary racism and China's opportunistic claims of racial loyalty, between declining economic power in Britain and surging capitalism in Asia, they sought a flexible position among the myriad possibilities (and problems) found in the global economy" (123). In working out how this flexibility is both a product and a condition of late capitalism, her book discusses the way the practices of the transnational Chinese business elite are imagined by themselves and by Southeast Asian states.

The Introduction frames the larger methodological and disciplinary stakes of Ong's project. *Flexible Citizenship* poses its arguments against three models that attempt to theorize "migrations, diasporas, and other transnational flows" (8). The first is migration studies, which sees subjects moving from peripheral countries to core ones (mostly the United States but increasingly European ones). The second model, which Ong associates with Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), sees cultural globalization as being produced through a kind of "virtual neighborhood," a process, says Ong, that fails to differentiate between "the power of mobile and nonmobile subjects" (11). The third model against which Ong poses her own work is cultural studies and postcolonial theory in the U.S., which Ong criticizes for their lack of material analysis, and for their ascription of heroic resistance to capitalism to the subaltern/the colonized, an "innocent concept of the essential diasporan subject, one that celebrates hybridity, 'cultural' border crossing, and the production of difference" (13). Her critique on this account encompasses the work of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, James Clifford and Homi Bhabha: according to Ong, such work is part of a middle class academic intellectual fantasy that ascribes resistance to capitalism (which the academic is enjoying, for the most part) to an oppressed "colonized" subject across the sea. In a sense, this book is an important correction and theorization of what Ong considers these errors; her analysis is embedded in economic contexts, and she examines the business elites and growing middle classes in Asia who have benefited from capitalism--while paying some attention as well to the working women and men, ethnic minorities, and aboriginal peoples who pay the price of development.

The first section of the book charts the discursive production of "a distinctive Chinese modernity linked to overseas Chinese" (36). Ong details the post-Mao Chinese strategy of negotiating with global capitalism: "a particular combination of the developmentalist state [wherein the state facilitates quick growth], the disciplining of labor forces, the careful cultivation of transnational capital, the repression of human rights, and economic competition with the West" (38). Amidst

the changes engendered by these processes, Ong discerns the state's strategic revival of a discourse of Confucianism as a moral force that links Chinese modernity to the overseas Chinese (huaqiao) in Southeast Asia and the United States. Herself a huaqiao born in Malaysia and now in the Anthropology Department at Berkeley, Ong finds good economic reasons for the newly minted official view of the overseas Chinese:

A new discourse, produced by the officially controlled media, has constructed a new term for these diasporan subjects--haiwai huaren, or "Chinese living overseas," an ambiguous label that removes the old stigma of huaqiao but retains the master symbol of irrefutable racial/ cultural links to the motherland. After being vilified by mainlanders, overseas Chinese are stereotyped as the embodiment of traditional Chinese familialism, business acumen, and talent for wealth making--the old Chinese folk values that are now being officially valorized for building a bridge to China's modern future. (43-4)

Ong goes on to analyze the way "Confucianism" is deployed by such discourse in order to normalize--to make "Chinese"--the ongoing market restructuring. Which is not to say, of course, that local mainland populations don't produce other kinds of knowledge about the huaqiao's role in Chinese modernity as exploitative and corrupt. The second chapter continues her analysis of the way discourses about race and nation are important to the self-conceptualization of Chinese modernity. While official discourse suspects the loyalty of the huaqiao (are they profiteers or patriots?), it also sees them as a kind of offshore stored memory in that they are understood to embody the pre-Communist traditions that are important to the market changes taking place in the nation. The overseas Chinese have likewise been seen as important contributors to the economic modernities in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Ong sees "Confucianism" as an ideological sign deployed by Lee Kuan Yew (the ex-prime minister of Singapore) and others as a way of resolving the tensions created by global capitalism between national interests and market interests, and between community stability and individual freedom. This discourse also serves, in what Ong calls a "self-orientalizing" move, in official illustrations of how "Asian values" differ from other, more decadent, Western ones (80).

In the second section, Ong moves to an analysis of the economic and cultural strategies of the huaqiao. As part of the strategy of flexible citizenship, the overseas Chinese business elite and their families may buy homes in North America and send their children to prestigious American colleges even as they continue to base businesses primarily in Southeast Asia. They find, however, that their economic capital is not so easily converted into social capital because of the symbolic racial hierarchies already established in the North American places of residence. Ong examines the cultural conflict that attends the elite's mobility, and moves interestingly beyond the simplistic "anti-immigrant backlash" explanation; instead, she argues that "In the commonsensical view of ethnic succession, recent arrivals from non-Western countries are expected to enter at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and wait their proper turn to reach middle-class status" (100). She looks at one instance of white resistance to Asian mobility in neighborhood groups' racialized opposition to newer "monster homes," and at the way some huaqiao use philanthropy--particularly to the arts and to universities--as a strategy to gain social prestige and acceptance. In Southeast Asia, meanwhile, Ong examines the practices of family businesses and their reliance on guanxi (personal and kinship networks) across borders. Here, too, Ong sees a euphemism when guanxi is named a core "Chinese" value: noting that guanxi is

a power effect that often controls women and the poor, Ong argues that business *guanxi* is “basically a structure of limits and inequality for the many and of flexibility and mobility for the few” (117). The business family is structured along gender lines in a way that bears out the transformative power of transnational changes: “family regimes have become more flexible in both dispersing and localizing members . . . [with] the business traveler as an ‘astronaut’ who is continually in the air while the wife and children [sometimes called ‘parachute kids’ if they are alone] are located in Australia, Canada, or the United States, earning rights of residence” (127). But even as Ong traces the “image management” of the elite, she repeatedly makes clear that such strategies of flexible citizenship remain impossible for the working classes and others among the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The third section continues this analysis of how discourse about the family gets caught up in ideology: a primary example is the way overseas Chinese have articulated a “fraternal tribal capitalism” (143), in which “doing business man to man,” or brother to brother, is seen as a way to bypass the state’s paternal legal and political rules (145). Ong notes that these practices are being extended throughout the region, and such fraternal business connections are increasingly viewed as successful because they in turn form partnerships with the families and bureaucrats of authoritarian governments. She goes on to analyze the way that, in the current structure of mobility wherein flexibility is coded as (and is in fact) a masculine property, *guanxi* for working class Chinese women is imagined as the *huaqiao* boyfriend (or, preferably, husband) who is the ticket to a more glamorous life abroad. The growing popular culture that serves the expanding middle-class ethnic Chinese consumer in Asia also gives evidence of this kind of fraternal order; such media posit a transnational Chinese community that links the overseas Chinese to one another. Discussing the international visibility of such film personae as John Woo, Chow Yun Fat and Jackie Chan, Ong notes that the “overall message of the kung fu and gangster movies is that the Chinese values of fraternal solidarity and justice are both vulnerable and vital in the chaotic world of Asian capitalism” (164). On the other hand, Ong shows how the influx of American satellite television channels such as MTV Asia and Star TV, with their use of Eurasian multilingual video jockeys, work to create “a modern ‘pan-Asian’ subject at home anywhere in the continent.” As with other cultural formations, Ong sees a capitalist logic behind this one as well: “The images distributed by Star TV, while culturally diverse and hybridized, seem to configure a depoliticized consumerist modernity that treats Asia as a *rijsttafel* of cultures, languages, and ethnicities and avoids issues of political difference” (168).

In the final section, Ong turns her attention to the way Southeast Asian nations have fashioned responses both to global capitalism and to the flexible citizenship it engenders. She takes issue with Samuel P. Huntington’s well-known 1993 Foreign Affairs article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” While acknowledging that Huntington’s article is repeatedly misread by those who anticipate and want to prepare for a military confrontation between the United States and China (in fact, Huntington called for a peaceful coexistence rather than a military “clash”), Ong argues that Huntington’s thinking is ultimately based on an outmoded orientalist “West versus Rest” binary, “which depends on an assumption of the lack of historical dynamism in regions (such as ‘the Orient’) that are defined by the center as peripheral” (189). In particular, Ong takes issue with Huntington’s notion that the adoption of economic liberalism in Asia has led to a resurgence of religious feeling and not the anticipated adoption of such Enlightenment values as the freedoms of press and assembly. In response, Ong unravels the concept of liberalism, and

shows that what this civilizational discourse terms “Asian values” are in fact the working out of market rationality--itself a result of post-Enlightenment liberalism--in the sense that “Asian tiger economies [are] liberal formations dedicated to the most efficient way of achieving maximal economic performance” (195).

Although this deconstruction of “liberalism” is unlikely to assuage human rights activists on both sides of the Pacific, Ong notes as well that states pursuing such postdevelopmentalist strategies are increasingly adopting nonrepressive means of control not because they are convinced by such socially liberal discourse, but because they seek to nurture their growing middle classes that have the technical expertise to manage the influx of global capital. Here she returns to an earlier theme and examines the way “Asian values” and “traditions” are deployed by the state in order to normalize social structures that are conducive to global capitalism: “while the Asian tigers used to govern too much through repressive measures, the shift to postdevelopmental strategies reveals that more and more, the solution to the liberal paradox of maximizing gain and minimizing government is to exercise disciplinary and pastoral powers that are cast in the principles of Islam or Confucianism” (210). In the final chapter of *Flexible Citizenship*, Ong argues that states have fashioned creative responses to global capitalism, and that the idea that the nation-state necessarily loses power because of these changes needs to be interrogated. Here she proposes one of the most interesting concepts of the book--that of “graduated sovereignty,” in which the state subjects “different sectors of the population to different regimes of valuation and control” (217), and creates different “zones” of law internally. She takes as a primary example Malaysia, with its three ethnicities (Malays, Chinese, and Indians) and its “six zones of graduated sovereignty” (“the low-wage manufacturing sector, the illegal labor market, the aboriginal periphery, the refugee camp, the cyber corridor, and the growth triangle,” the last of which is made up of three border-straddling economic development areas [218]) and details the different modes of law and state intervention that discipline each. Ong offers a deconstruction parallel to the one she performs on the discourse of Confucianism among governments trying to shape the imaginary of the Chinese business elites: in Malaysia, for instance, a new Islam friendly to global capitalism is emerging as a force that “is built on the common Islamic links between Malaysia, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian countries” (227); this new Islam “promotes new normativities in cultural behavior, technical expertise, and regional cooperation” (228).

Flexible Citizenship is an invaluable contribution to the study of late capitalism in Asia--and in the world--and is one that I would highly recommend for scholars and students in Asia-Pacific studies and related disciplines. What interests me most about the book is Ong’s deconstruction of the larger cultural discourses that have been set into play by states and elites in order to normalize the populations and practices required by global transnational business. One of the salient themes in Ong’s book is that the “peripheral” subjects and nations--viewed by past and current Western theory as dependent on and reactive to the West--have a great deal of economic and imaginative agency as they participate in the ongoing creation of global capitalism. Her deconstruction of Asia’s use of “Asian values” as immutable and essential is carefully paired with the orientaling discourses that have produced similar ideologies in the West, and, in another parallel, her characterization of the new market-friendly Confucianism and Islam can’t help but call to mind the market-friendly Christianity that dominates the United States today. The governments’ role in fashioning the ideological meanings of capital and nation is a fascinating

concept, and though Ong does not state it as such, it has a predictive power. We may now expect New Delhi to begin outlining a market-friendly Hinduism that will both call “home” the Indian and Indian American software millionaires of Silicon Valley and make manageable the booming middle class of software engineers, whose software and computer-related services were a \$4 billion industry in 1999, and who develop and maintain from India the computer software for many of the largest U.S. companies.

Of equal interest is Ong’s analysis of the huaqiao’s self-orientalizing procedures as they try to normalize the elite’s practices of flexible citizenship. My own research has been concerned with the American imaginary’s use of racial and cultural stereotypes, which are what the editors of the early Asian American literature anthology *Aiiieeee!* called “the low-maintenance engine of white supremacy.” For these editors, one of the dominant stereotypes is that of the Asian American as a sojourner in America, someone with an immutable and virtually genetic attachment to the ancestral land, to which he or she longs to return. But Ong remarks: “Whereas [Edward] Said has described orientalism as a one-sided and self-reifying process, I have tried throughout this chapter to represent the discursive objects themselves as cocreators in orientalism” (131). Both the huaqiao and official (Asian) state discourse help promulgate a sojourner discourse, as Ong shows when she says that Lee Kuan Yew implies that “although ethnic Chinese have lived among other cultural groups, they have remained ‘Chinese’ in a basic, unchanging way” (68).

Here Ong notes the conflicts that can attend the different practices of the older Asian American groups and the newly formed huaqiao associations, who don’t necessarily have citizenship in the United States. This problem is a crucial one, as Ong recognizes: in the American imaginary, are Asians in America loyal citizens or potentially disloyal sojourners? As Ong argues, “The recent uproar over illegal Asian contributions to the Democratic National Committee reflects America’s deep ambivalence about whether Asians or Asian Americans can ever be morally distinguished or ever become ‘legitimate’ Americans” (176). Too late for inclusion in her book was the December, 1999 predicament of Wen Ho Lee, the American scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory who was fired, charged with removing nuclear secrets from a Laboratory computer, and suspected of passing those secrets on to China. What is at stake in both these images is that of the Asian sojourner who is loyal to a foreign land. But Ong questions the strategy of established Asian American groups to distance themselves from the arriviste huaqiao. Asserting that “About 60 percent of Asian Americans are foreign born” (280), a truth claim for which she offers no explanation or documentation, Ong argues that “By defending themselves as Asian Americans, an ethno-racial category, rather than as American citizens with universal political claims as members of the nation, Asian Americans continue to be trapped by an American ideology that limits the moral claims to social legitimacy by nonwhites” (180). One wonders why she believes that Asian Americans can’t do both: that is, assert a universal right to citizenship and have a conceptual space for ethnic identity. Asian Americans are not the first racial minority to claim American citizenship while preserving some sense of ethnic communal identity.

As with her discussion of Asian American strategies of inclusion, her use of the word “transnationality” also seems insufficiently worked out. By “transnationality” in the subtitle, Ong basically means population and capital flows among China, Southeast Asia, and the United

States. This arrangement has the U.S. standing in as basically the sole point of reference for the Americas, which is strange considering the presence of Asians--and particularly Chinese--in Vancouver and in Toronto. The dynamics she describes are at work in these places as well, as she notes in several passing references; but a fuller consideration of them and their differences from a U.S. context would only have strengthened Ong's arguments. For example, what's missing from her account of white American resistance to the "monster homes" of some of the huaqiao is the anxiety in the white middle class that they won't be able to pass on their status as home-owners to their children. To take Vancouver as an example, since 1980 housing prices have ballooned to the extent that the educated children of the white Canadian middle class cannot generally afford the same kind of house as their parents did. This inflationary change is overidentified with Asian immigration (there are other factors as well, such as internal white Canadian migration from East to West), but nonetheless there is a sense that new money destabilizes the class system in Vancouver, with the upper middle class no longer certain that it can pass that status (as marked by homeownership, as Ong notes) on to its children.

The final and needless Afterword to the volume is guaranteed to offend anyone who is not an anthropologist, for Ong takes it as an opportunity to excoriate "universalizing armchair theorists" (240), by which she appears to mean sociologists, those associated with cultural studies and postcolonial studies, and even earlier anthropologists. Against these disciplinary duds, Ong offers "A newer generation of anthropologists who are freeing themselves from the binarism of older models and deploying poststructuralist theories" (242). In case you are an anthropologist and aren't sure which group you fit into, Ong includes a lengthy endnote naming salient texts (her first book is among them). This privileging of the new anthropology--to be carefully distinguished from other new anthropologies, such as that of James Clifford--is strange, considering her use of Foucault in analyzing "truth claims"; what about her own discipline and her own work? Hasn't anthropology ever borrowed anything useful from a different discipline? Isn't "culture-as-a-text," rejected by Ong (242), a useful metaphor, insofar as it urges anthropologists to develop different kinds of reading techniques (something Margaret Mead needed badly)? While this Afterword seems intended to return the reader to some of the methodological stakes which Ong broached in her Introduction, its tone of disciplinary chauvinism is not characteristic of the greater part of the book.

A final limitation of *Flexible Citizenship* is one that it shares with many book volumes that are essentially collections of previously-published journal articles: I don't mean the problem of the coherence of the work, since this eight-chapter volume is held together very nicely by its themes of global capitalism in the Asia-Pacific region and the economic responses and cultural fashionings of both a transnational Chinese business elite and the national governments in Southeast Asia. The problem instead is the currency of the work; although the book was published in 1999, five of the eight chapters were published between 1992 and 1997. While Ong can't be blamed for this publishing lag, the problem is that the book appears unevenly revised between its inception as a series of articles and then as a final volume. At one point, for instance, she refers to "the rising affluence of Asian countries and the relative decline of Western economies" (120)--a statement that made sense when it appeared as an article in 1994, but that requires some explanation in 2000 or in 1999. The five years between its initial appearance (not to say when it was actually written) and the book's publication has been a time of heady economic expansion, especially in the United States, and a concurrent slump in the Asian tiger

economies. This leaves the reader unsatisfied--this recent book is already a little dated on some issues; we'd like to know what Ong thinks of more contemporary developments in the Pacific rim economies.

Although there are some references to the current troubles, there's no sense of how they fit into Ong's picture as a whole. In the seventh chapter, for instance, Ong opens a sentence by stating, "With the world's economies under assault from speculation by Wall Street banks" (212), but then appears to back off of this interpretation in the next chapter when she says that "whereas the international press attributes the recent wave of currency devaluation to reckless borrowing and lending, the building of megaprojects, and the lack of market controls in the tiger economies, local politicians blame outsiders, who are viewed as having the antithesis of Asian civilizational values" (232). The chapter's concluding paragraph begins "Indeed, as this book goes to press, the economic typhoon unleashed by unruly capital markets has toppled the Soeharto regime and shattered Indonesia's economy. In contrast, Asian tiger countries have responded by strengthening the hand of the state against capital flows" (239). That Ong's book ends in medias res is not her fault, but it leaves the reader knowing that an important part of this story is untold in *Flexible Citizenship*--indeed, that the story itself is still unfolding. Ong's important book provides an invaluable interpretive structure for its readers to watch what will follow.